

The Internet, its Social and Ethical Problem to the Young and How Curriculum Can Address the Issue

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Abstract—The impact of the information revolution is double edged. While it is applauded for its versatility and performance robustness and acclaimed for making life smooth and easy, on the other hand people are concerned about its dark side especially to younger generations. The education system should extend its educating role beyond the school to home. Parents should be included in forming the policies of Internet use as well as in the curriculum delivery. This paper discusses how curriculum can be instrumental in addressing social and ethical issues resulted from the Internet.

Keywords—Curriculum, Ethics, Internet Addiction, Social Issues

I. INTRODUCTION

LIKE any other educational support tools, information technology was introduced at schools for the purpose of assisting with teaching and learning. The Internet, as one of the apparent results of the information revolution, has become a popular educational tool among educators and learners for its robustness and versatility.

Given its attractiveness to young people, it is inevitable that the Internet has become a platform for enjoyable social activities as well as a good 'test bed' for many 'tech savvy' students. Internet related activities have made a place in the teenagers' hobby lists and students have increasingly becoming adept at utilizing the Internet's many interesting features such as electronic mailing, Internet Relay Chat, online gaming, web browsing and countless other.

The use of Internet among the young students cannot avoid being judged and criticized especially from the social and ethical perspectives. The pros and cons of the Internet are widely discussed and have become one of the most debated topics in the education system. This essay will study the literatures discussing the disadvantages of the Internet to young generation's social and ethical development and what curriculum can do to address the problems.

II. THE DARK SIDES OF INTERNET FROM SOCIAL AND ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

The impact of the information revolution is double edged. While it is applauded for its versatility and performance robustness and acclaimed for making life smooth and easy, on the other hand people are concerned about its dark side especially to younger generations. The majority of literatures viewed for this paper agree that the Internet is reputed to be one of the reasons for social and ethical problems among school's students. [1], [2], [3], [4].

However, Rahman [5], brings up a valid point by stating that the blame for teenagers social and ethical misconducts

should not be put on the technology alone. He stresses the importance of other contributing factors to the problem, such as the upbringing and the environment. In addition, Moll [6], questions parents' "very little or no knowledge" about their children online activities. She also criticizes their lack of responsibilities in protecting their children from the Internet's harmful possibilities. The Internet is often seen as one of the biggest culprits in young people's social and ethical problem and this notion has lead the society to overlook other contributing factors to the problem. It is important that these factors are acknowledged and targeted in order to effectively address the issues.

The setbacks of the Internet are often related to the extended exposure of negative influences online, time wasted in front of the PC screen, social isolation, Internet addiction and ethical misconduct. These types of negative impacts are often portrayed to be effecting the young generation the most [3]. While adults may be using the Internet for work related and domestic reasons, most teenagers surf the Internet as a hobby, which opens the door for more exposure to the negative possibilities. According to Thomas and Watzman [4], teenagers seem the most vulnerable to potential negative effects as they use the Internet for more hours than do adults.

Among the negative aspects commonly discussed in the literatures studied are:

A. Internet Addiction

People become addicted to the Internet when they have dissociated it from their face-to-face life [7]. Today, this phenomenon is very common among the 'netizens'. Many Internet users have experiences drastic lifestyle changes in order to spend more time online which can be detrimental for younger generations. [2]

B. Bad influence from online correspondence

It has become a concern that young generations are exposed to destructive ideas through online communication. There is a terrifying possibility for the young befriending the wrong people through the Internet - "If you are concerned about your child joining the wrong social group at school, imagine the entire world of 400 million users having access to the curious mind of your child -what kind of developmental and psychology implications do you think it will have for your child to be on the 'buddy list' of others who are into criminal behavior?" [2]

C. Bad influence through illegal, immoral, criminal and other inappropriate contents

Being such an open and hard to control system, it is easy for anybody including youngsters to access these materials. Davies [2] defines "inappropriate content" as a variety of information resources available on the Internet that parents

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likely do not want their children looking at for the fear of the psychological effects by viewing this material repeatedly. "While the Internet has been praised for making news and educational materials widely available, it also has been criticized for the dissemination of pornography, hate speech, defamatory statements and other materials that a particular nation or group may find undesirable" [8].

D. Lack of face-to-face social interaction

Online communication is seen as detrimental to social skill development. The lack of social cues, inadequately supplemented by devices like emoticons, demands a level of complexity and care in communicative approach [9].

E. Facilitation of deception

The anonymity concept widely used in online communication has promoted deceptions to the point that it creates an atmosphere of deficient in trust. Anonymity makes people feel less vulnerable about opening up; the freedom of speech is exploited to the fullest as people can choose not to reveal their identities. When acting out hostile feelings, the anonymous does not have to take responsibility for those actions. Suler [7] suggests that people might even convince themselves that those behaviors "aren't me at all."

F. Plagiarism

The abundance of knowledge in the Internet has led to an increased number of 'web cheaters' among students. Students can be tempted to simply implement a 'cut, paste and excel' method for their assignments. Making the headlines include the incidents where the British government was found to have plagiarized an article in the Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA) Journal in 2003 [10] and the incident at the Australia's Monash University in 2002 where the then vice-chancellor David Robinson had to resign over plagiarism claims. [11]. If the government bureaucrats and a high ranked academic would fell for the tendency to take credits on other people's good works, it is not surprising that students would also be tempted to do the same. The wealth of knowledge the Internet provides can only make it easier.

G. Budding Hackers

Many tech savvy teenagers find it amusing to be able to 'hack' or interrupt existing network system. February 2000 had seen an "online attack" which lasted almost five days, slowing down the Internet by 20% and crashing many of the world's most popular e-commerce sites. The most ironic fact about this incident is that a teen hacker was the culprit and he was using only a simple hacking tool downloaded from the Internet [12].

With all the exposures to the technology, the negative possibilities are endless. The society is under pressure to fight the ethical and social problems brought by the Internet to the young generation. Zuckerman & Roger [12], claimed that the importance of Internet safety among the young has been acknowledged and the education system has been recognized as a good starting point for the teaching. This is demonstrated by an example of \$300,000 funds allocation for the education system by the American Justice Department to "develop curricula, identify successful programs and spread the word

that kids need ethical as well as technical education to become successful citizens in the Internet age".

Another researcher, Moll [6] is suggesting a more radical step in addressing the problem. She suggests a restriction on access to the Internet for the young, claiming that it is not necessary for younger students to possess web skills too early. She also emphasizes that the education system needs a universal 'age-related convention' with regard to the Internet use. Even though Moll [6] takes in experts' advices and recommendations to support her call for a restricted Internet activity among the young, her suggestion for a complete restriction on Internet activities may not be very convincing. The students need to be educated at an early stage on the correct way to become responsible technology users. "Plugging off" as suggested by Moll [6] may not teach the rights from the wrongs instead it can lead to deprivation of knowledge and experience.

III. GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN HELPING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM ADDRESSING THE ISSUES

Many researches and literatures encourage for an educational response to the needs of addressing the social and ethical problems brought by the Internet. Willard [13] suggests that that young people are more prone to engage themselves in irresponsible Internet activities, therefore the education system have a duty to educate the students about their responsibilities as cybercitizens. Similar position is expressed by Teicher [14], "With the growing impact of technology on society and the importance of "cyber-security" on a national level, it is more critical than ever for teachers to revisit the practice of citizenship and apply it cyberspace". Moll [6] suggests that the time has come for education system to adopt strict technology policies, which minimized the harmful effects to the young. In the fast moving world of information technology, it is vital that education system is adaptable and it is important that educators review their traditional educational practices to accommodate the society's technological changes.

The governments and the public have steadily acknowledged the possible dangers the Internet may have on the young. More resources had been allocated by the governments for the education system to address the problems. [12], [15]. There are also contributions from non-profit organizations to help educate children on Internet safety and responsibility, for example, The Cybersmart! School Program that has co published The Cybersmart! K-8 Curriculum with Macmillan McGraw-Hill. [14],[16].

The IT industries have also contributed through the research and development of technological solutions; for example the filtering programs such as NetNanny and CyberPatrol as well as other auditing and monitoring tools which are widely used at schools as well as homes to block access to undesirable sites and monitor students' Internet activities. [16] [17]

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF AWARENESS

Regardless of the technology sophistication and funds allocated, awareness is still the key to address the social and ethical issues brought by the information revolution. According to Teicher [16], "no technology is fail-safe". Similarly, Emmans [17] has asserted that students must be

made aware of the cyber responsibilities as the solutions designed to address the problems can only do so much as “no software and no policy can be foolproof”. The world of information technology has no boundaries; each day there is a new technological invention being introduced, and it could be another hacking tool. Today’s powerful technical solution used to combat Internet’s social and ethical problems can be obsolete tomorrow.

Physically restricting young students access to the Internet [6] is not a desirable solution, as this not only will deprive the young from using the most powerful and educative information tool, it will also triggers curiosity that may lead to more ethical and social problem.

In another differing opinion, a senior scientist from Stanford Research Institute had questioned the wisdom in publicly educating people on how to combat Internet social and ethical problem, fearing that it will indirectly reveal the security strategy to the hackers. According to him, the ‘winning strategy’ is to improve the security of the infrastructure [12] While his point is valid regarding exposing strategy to hackers, the fact remains that the young generations are in serious need of a proper guidance to have a clear understanding of the expectations for their behaviour when using the Internet.

V. A CURRICULUM REFORM – INCORPORATING AWARENESS ACROSS THE SYLLABUS

Incorporating Internet safety awareness, as part of a curriculum reform is a measure that education systems can take in order to address the social risks and dangers associated with students’ Internet use. In this new curriculum, students should be taught about social responsibilities in using the technology and encouraged to have ongoing discussions “to deal with challenging online experiences”. [14] This involves understanding and developing critical thinking in distinguishing the risks and the benefits of the information revolution.

Schools should also continue to encourage face-to-face activities to get the students involved in conventional social interactions with their peers. While it is important for students to move along with the technology, schools have to ensure that healthy and normal face-to-face interactions continue to be part of the teaching and learning process.

VI. CURRICULUM AND PARENTS

Parents should play the biggest role in handling any form of social problems faced by their children, and problems resulting from the information revolution should be no exception. However, it is very common today that parents simply leave the responsibility of overcoming social problems to the education system, especially when it concerns the use of technology. Surveys demonstrated that parents have the biggest concerns regarding the negative effects brought by the Internet to their children [1],[6], yet, most of them often appear to be poorly informed about their children’s Internet activities. Moll [6] regards “the lack of parental vigilance is a worldwide problem’ in relation to Internet safety for the young.

Schools must consider involving parents in the students’ awareness programs on the Internet safety and responsibility. While the curriculum reform and technology solution may work at school, there is no guarantee the students will get the same guidance and protection at home. Schools still have to rely on parents to continue guiding their children. [17]

There are many reasons that have led parents to rely on the education system to guide their children in embracing the technology:

A. Parents are too busy

This is one of the main reasons for any type of social problems. [18] The modern world has now made the responsibility to make ends meet priority in households. Parents are too busy making a living to worry about what computers and the Internet can do to their children.

B. Parents cannot afford the technology

This is usually the case for families who cannot afford to have computers and Internet at home. [19] As “children’s access to computers varies with family income.” [20], many of those who come from households that cannot afford to have computers and Internet connections get their introduction and access to the Internet through school. In many demographic researches, there is a big percentage gap on computer and Internet access availability between families of higher income and those of lower income. [20]. It is also suggested that poorer students, whose families cannot afford computers at home, would enjoy the opportunities to use the technology at school. The school has become the only place their children can have access to the technology; therefore parents from a ‘no computer household’ have no exposure to the technology. [21]

C. Parents do not know the technology

Parents who are not exposed to computers cannot share the concept of IT with their children. “Parents who do not have a clue about how net technology works could not hope to teach children how to surf safely” [15]. Parents are also worried and afraid of the negative implications of the technology. Some take drastic measures similar to what Moll [6] has suggested, they deny the problem by banning computers and Internet from home. Parents may feel that they are not knowledgeable enough to teach their children about IT - They feel that the children know more than them and fear appearing uninformed before their children. [15]

The education system must acknowledge these problems and continue playing an educating role by including the parents in the Internet safety awareness programs. Brochures, information days or ongoing interesting activities such as parents-children web design competition can be an eye opener to parents. Through such program parents learn what technology their children are using at school and the possibilities of danger that this technology may have, and how to address the problems. This is demonstrated through The CyberSmart! School Program, which extends the Internet safety and responsibility awareness beyond the school to the students’ families [16]. Emmans [17] suggests that parents must be included in forming policies that is governing computer use at school and home. Teachers and parents must

get together to draw guidelines and rules for the children's Internet use

VII. CONCLUSION

Most of the literatures reviewed addressed a need for the education system to respond to the social and ethical problem brought by the Internet especially to the young generations.

Though some researchers believe in a more restricted Internet access for young students [6] or in beefing up the security measure by implementing blocking and filtering technologies [12], the most significant approach agreed by most of the researchers is to educate the students on the manners, ethics and precautions that should be taught to avoid them from falling for social and ethical problem while using the Internet.

The governments and the public have realized that the education system cannot be the sole answer to the social problems associated with the information revolution, with that understanding they have allocated more resources and collaborated with the education system to assist with addressing the problem.

Parents have been identified as one of the key players in combating students' Internet social and ethical problem. However, while parents are voicing out their concerns about the issue, the statistics still shows that most parents are not aware about their children's Internet activities. The education system should extend its educating role beyond the school to home. Parents should participate in forming the policies of Internet use as well as in the curriculum delivery.

If neglected, social and ethical problems resulting from the misuse of information technology tools can be serious. No technology solution can be 'fail-proof' and no rules that cannot be broken. "The young must learn that ethical behaviour in the electronic world is as important as ethical behaviour in the physical world" [16]

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